Introduction: American Exceptionalism, a reconsideration

Christopher Lloyd

University of East Anglia

In both of Barack Obama's presidential victory speeches, America is portrayed as exemplary and exceptional. In 2008, Obama said his election revealed that 'America's beacon still burns as bright': that 'the true strength of our nation comes not from the might of our arms or the scale of our wealth, but from the enduring power of our ideals: democracy, liberty, opportunity and unyielding hope' (Obama 2008). These ideals, he claimed, form the 'true genius of America': 'America can change. Our union can be perfected' (Obama 2008). Here, Obama implicitly acknowledges the long-standing notion of America as exceptional: a 'beacon' to the rest of the world, burning as brightly as it did when the Founding Fathers first set foot on the continent. This victory speech, however, ushers in the idea of a strong nation annealed not by 'wealth' or 'arms', but by certain grandiose ideals. In 2012, Obama's victory speech returns to this idea more explicitly:

> What makes America exceptional are the bonds that hold together the most diverse nation on Earth, the belief that our destiny is shared, that this country only works when we accept certain obligations to one another and future generations so that the freedom which so many Americans have fought for and died for come with responsibilities as well as rights, and among those are love and charity and duty and patriotism. That's what makes America great.
>
> (Obama 2012)[1]

What was, in 2008, the 'genius' of America is now its fundamental 'greatness': its ideal status of nationhood. In this latter speech, exceptionalism is premised upon 'togetherness': a collective responsibility, a civil duty to each other and to future generations, all of which is sedimented into the very fabric of American society.

Every scholar of American studies will recognize the concept of American Exceptionalism that runs through these two speeches. Donald Pease writes that '[a]s a discourse, American Exceptionalism includes a complex assemblage of theological and secular assumptions out of which Americans have developed the lasting belief in America as the fulfilment of the national ideal to which other nations aspire' (Pease 2009: 7). Pease precisely pinpoints the framing and content of exceptionalism here, locating its import in the accumulation of ideas and concepts which are perhaps key to its longevity. For Obama to speak of this national ideal, moreover, in his inaugural address – and for the majority of the American nation to not necessarily baulk at this – means, I think, something quite profound. This special issue of the *European Journal of American Culture* entitled 'American Exceptionalism in the Twenty-First Century' wants to explore and interrogate contemporary incarnations of exceptionalist rhetoric, thinking and discourse through a range of cultural texts.

Exceptionalism has arguably been situated at the centre of the nation's ideology since its founding in the seventeenth century. Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* is frequently cited as the first scripting of America as exceptional, but long before this, Governor John Winthrop – sailing from Britain to Salem with Puritan emigrants – gave a famous speech aboard the Arbella ship igniting this ideology. Sometime between 8 April and 12 June 1630, Winthrop declared that 'we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all the people are upon us'. This separation from the rest of the world – the way in which America will be watched from afar, as elevated on that hill – is the kernel around which exceptionalism grows. In essence, Pease tells us, exceptionalism has a number of key meanings: America is ' "distinctive" (meaning merely different)', ' "unique" (meaning anomalous)' or ' "exemplary" (meaning a model for other nations to follow)' (Pease 2009: 9). Thus, as Deborah Madsen writes, 'America and Americans are special, exceptional,

because they are charged with saving the world from itself', but also 'America and Americans must sustain a high level of spiritual, political and moral commitment to this exceptional destiny' (Madsen 1998: 2). Amy Kaplan pushes this further as she argues that exceptionalism is that 'exemplary status' of America 'as the apotheosis of the nation-form itself', which is a 'model for the rest of the world' (Kaplan 2005: 16). This model is referenced by Obama in the above quotations; still, in the twenty-first century, the belief and faith in an ideal(ized) and exceptional American nation remains at the centre of political rhetoric.

It is here, though, that Pease's thesis steps in, revealing how exceptionalism also means that the nation is ' "exempt" from the laws of historical progress (meaning that it is an "exception" to the laws and rules governing the development of other nations)' (Pease 2009: 9). The commitment to an exceptional destiny becomes warped and hollow as it 'produce[s] beliefs to which the state has regularly taken exception' (Pease 2009: 9). I do not want to rehearse Pease's argument here, but central to his book *The New American Exceptionalism* is the excavation of how, as the idea gains traction and weighting throughout the centuries, exceptionalism becomes a forceful and generative ideology suitable to the political and social needs of the moment. Through the Cold War particularly, Pease writes, exceptionalism functions as a fantasy which necessarily brings exceptions to its own rules. Though, as Madsen writes, exceptionalism 'has always offered a mythological refuge from the chaos of history and the uncertainty of life' (Madsen 1998: 166); this refuge has frequently been a site of violence, imperialism and global domination. Thus, Pease's book makes clear to us how exceptionalism functions as a cluster of fantasies and investments, a collection of 'contradictory political and cultural descriptions [in] correlation with one another' (Pease 2009: 8). Pease's book and the essays in this special issue dissect and explore this concept further.

Pease references Jacqueline Rose's seminal *States of Fantasy* at the beginning of his book, and I want to explicitly state this introduction's indebtedness to her argument too. In this book, Rose connects the psychoanalytic concept of fantasy (specifically expounded by Freud) to statehood and national identity. Fantasy, for Freud, is part of what makes 'group identifications possible and impossible at one and the same time'; thus, fantasy is social reality's 'precondition or psychic glue' (Rose 1998: 3). Rose's ultimate argument is that 'there is no way of understanding political identities and destinies without letting fantasy into the frame' and more than this, fantasy 'plays a central, constitutive role in the modern world of states and nations' (Rose 1998: 4). The insights into fantasy that Rose provides are numerous and substantial. If exceptionalism is to be taken seriously, we must attend to its status and shape as fantasy; or, as embroiled in fantasy. Rose warns us from thinking that fantasy is merely a flimsy or insubstantial intellectual pursuit. Rather, as she says, '[l]ike blood, fantasy is thicker than water, all too solid – *contra* another of fantasy's more familiar glosses as ungrounded supposition, lacking in foundation, not solid *enough*' (Rose 1998: 5). Here, then, Rose makes clear the tangible effects and affects of a fantasy-like exceptionalism. Indeed, it is to a variety of cultural texts, emerging at a significant time in contemporary history that the following essays attend with this very real fantasy in mind. We want to ground exceptionalism, then, as a 'solid' fantasy; to do so, we read it through particular cultural products that are grounded in (and speak to) a twenty-first-century context.

It might be argued, however, that exceptionalism surely has little currency in today's globalized world; for who would really believe in a singular exceptional nation such as America with growing superpowers such as China, for example, asserting themselves on a global stage? Doesn't a pluralized, decentred, non-homogenous nation require very different fantasies than the one which has lingered at the heart of the America since its founding? Though this sociopolitical frame is interesting to explore, as Americanists we are also aware

how American Exceptionalism has, understandably, been dislocated somewhat from the centre of American studies in recent years. The 'global turn' in literary and cultural study, particularly, focusing on transnational and hybrid identities, multicultural populations and geographical borderlands exemplifies this. It relates, specifically, to these larger social issues too. In reorienting and rerouting the study and understanding of America, concepts such as exceptionalism (which in this new international paradigm looks and sounds defunct) have been sidelined. However, in their introduction to *States of Emergency*, Russ Castronovo and Susan Gillman make us aware that '[q]uestioning the category of nation is one thing, but there are limits, as well as possibilities' to this approach (Castronovo and Gillman 2009: 6). Indeed, maybe 'the efforts to retool U.S. studies have been overshadowed, skewed by all the frequent, if not ritual, uses of "post," "beyond" and "beneath" ' (Castronovo and Gillman 2009: 6). Their essay collection wants to explore the 'object(s)' of American studies: probing old and new sites, texts, cultural products and figures that might tell us something about the nation. They warn us of investing too strongly in the trans- or post-national, for to question the nation too absolutely might be to lose significant intellectual acumen. I want to follow Castronovo and Gillman here, insisting upon the political and cultural necessity of re-reading and re-conceptualizing American Exceptionalism as a significant part of the United States' national identity, even in the face of a changing nation and international contexts.

In a recent address to the United Nations General Assembly, Obama once again expounded the concept of American Exceptionalism: 'I believe America is exceptional. In part because we have shown a willingness through the sacrifice of blood and treasure to stand up not only for our own narrow self-interest, but for the interest of all' (Obama 2013). Even if we put aside this global 'all', whose interest surely cannot be singular, along with the euphemistic 'standing up', Obama's point still problematically rests upon the 'sacrifice of blood and treasure'. As though a large-scale conceding of both truly foster a global

exceptionalism, let alone the idea that this is something only America has yet achieved or been capable of. Throughout this United Nations speech, Obama's reliance upon exceptionalism as a national fantasy (foundational, solid and pervasive, as Rose acknowledges) insists that we continue to take this idea seriously. While the essays here all view exceptionalism as problematic, this does not mean we can discard or debunk it entirely. For the present authors, American Exceptionalism is a myth, a fantasy, a fetish, a story; but, what this issue wants to do, while acknowledging these opinions, is to continue to ask *why* exceptionalism still circulates as a discourse and national ideology. More than that, we want to probe and investigate the meanings of exceptionalism, its shapes and textures, its haunting potential in the United States – that is, the way it lives on in the present and affects current cultural forms. Rose suggests that the modern state (or nation) 'enacts its authority as ghostly, fantasmatic authority. But it would be wrong to deduce from this […] that the state is any less real for that' (Rose 1998: 9). The 'reality' of the contemporary American nation is at the fore of our cultural investigations; in continuing to attend to exceptionalism and the cluster of investments, ideologies, fantasies, desires and myths entangled in it, we might just be able to gesture towards this (con)founding American discourse.

Gilles Vandivinit's essay 'From the Virgin Land to the Transnational Identities of the Twenty-First Century: Exceptionalist Rhetoric in the Field of American Studies' takes a long view of exceptionalism, charting a history of the discourse's form and ubiquity. The question of why exceptionalism continues to feature in American politics and society is at the heart of this essay; Vandivinit offers a consideration of its 'malleability', thus enriching our understanding of this pervasive national construct. Continuing this investigation, Dietmar Meinel's ' "And when everyone's super […] no-one will be": The Limits of American Exceptionalism in *The Incredibles*' probes the meanings of exceptionalism as it intersects with neo-liberalism in the Disney-Pixar film *The Incredibles*. This 'superhero' film envisages

a world view that at once reflects and ignites exceptionalist logic as well as critiques it. Reading such a popular contemporary film, Meinel perceptively enlarges our cultural canon in exploring this American idea. Offering readings from literature in 'The Semiotics of Power: Corrupting Sign Systems in Contemporary American Exceptionalism and in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* and Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*', Tanguy Harma interrogates a selection of texts from the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century, revealing their interest in the vacillations of signifier and signified. For Harma, these novels reflect the complex signification of exceptionalism itself and its meanings at the turn of the millennium. Further analysing contemporary American fiction, Monika Loewy's '*Lunar Park*: From Ashes to Ashes', reads Bret Easton Ellis' postmodern novel as an investigation into the structures of avowal and disavowal that hold up not only ideas of self, but also of nation. The spectre of 9/11 haunts this text, as do Ellis' previous novels and characters; this mirrors, for Loewy, the spectres of imperialism that exceptionalism has to disavow to function as fantasy. The final essay from Nicolas Brinded, 'Exceptionalist Discourse and the Colonization of Sublime Spaces in Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity*, Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* and Thomas Cole's *The Oxbow*', extends our investigation of exceptionalism galactically. Considering the long-standing idea of the sublime in American culture, Brinded draws a line from the paintings of Thomas Cole to contemporary American films, which transport us into space. This extra-national view reveals both the sublime's roots in, and critique of, exceptionalism.

Ending here, this special issue wants to gesture outwards, offering a way of conceiving American Exceptionalism that is both grounded in the nation and willing to take geographical leaps away from it. Perhaps, it is necessary, today, to take both the long- and short view on exceptionalism, spatially and temporally: from plotting out its history, to reading its contemporary instantiations up close; from distanced perspectives on it, to

localized readings. This special issue has merely broached some ways of reading exceptionalism in the twenty-first century; we, as editors, hope that it can keep ignited the study of this long-lasting discourse.

Acknowledgements

This special issue is the outcome of a symposium held at Goldsmiths, University of London in 2013 entitled 'American Exceptionalisms: "The city upon a hill" in the Twenty-First Century'. The essays here are versions of some papers given that day. As editors, we must thank those who participated in the conference, especially Anna Hartnell from Birkbeck for her insightful keynote lecture and warm support for the project throughout. In the English and Comparative Literature department, thanks also go to Caroline Blinder, Padraig Kirwan and Gail McDonald for their participation in the closing roundtable and Rick Crownshaw for his continued academic help. Finally, thanks go to Donald Pease for kindly agreeing to write the preface to this issue, as well as inspiring our Americanist endeavours in various ways.

References

Castronovo, R. and Gillman, S. (eds) (2009), 'Introduction: The study of American problems', in *States of Emergency: The Object of American Studies*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, pp. 1–16.

Kaplan, A. (2005), *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Madsen, D. L. (1998), *American Exceptionalism*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Pease, D. E. (2009), *The New American Exceptionalism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Rose, J. (1998), *States of Fantasy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Obama, B. (2008), 'Full text: Obama's victory speech', *BBC News*, 5 November, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/us_elections_2008/7710038.stm Accessed 23 July 2014.

———. (2012), 'Barack Obama's victory speech – Full text', *The Guardian*, 7 November, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/nov/07/barack-obama-speech-full-text. Accessed 23 July 2014.

———. (2013), 'Full transcript: President Obama's speech at the U.N. general assembly', *Washington Post*, 24 September, http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/transcript-president-obamas-speech-at-the-un-general-assembly/2013/09/24/64d5b386-2522-11e3-ad0d-b7c8d2a594b9_story.html?hpid=z1. Accessed 23 July 2014.

[1] Here, I should note, Obama is partly referring to the socio-economic backdrop of global recession; thus, the obligations to one another are politicized by a particular historical moment. Nonetheless, that exceptionalism returns in this context only serves to suggest its potency in emerging at various moments in time.